

Women under the Third Reich

A Biographical Dictionary

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ZASSENHAUS, HILTGUNT

(1916-)

Resistance Worker, Germany

Hiltgunt Zassenhaus, called the German Angel for her wartime activities that helped keep track of some 1,200 prisoners, was born in 1916 to Julius Zassenhaus, a former Lutheran minister and headmaster of a girls' high school, and his wife Margaret, active in reforming the Social Democratic Party. In 1933, while attending high school in Hamburg, Hiltgunt was assigned to write a report on Adolf Hitler's speech at the Victoria sports ground. She labeled him "psychotic" and when the students in her school were ordered to give the "Heil, Hitler" salute, she refused. She was given twenty-four hours to obey.

The next day, the entire class, as well as the teachers and principal, were watching to see what Zassenhaus would do. Her arm jerked and went through a nearby window and she was taken to the hospital. After that, when it came time to offer the salute, she was ignored. The day Hitler came to power in 1933, the Zassenhaus home was covered with swastikas and eventually Julius was dismissed as headmaster. The family's books and writings were burned. When the police arrived at the house to arrest Julius, they found him too ill with Parkinson's disease to move. They required Hiltgunt to join the German Girls' League, but she let her membership lapse after only one week. Her mother, meanwhile, was working to help Jews to escape.

In 1938 Zassenhaus graduated from the University of Hamburg with a degree in Scandinavian languages and became the only female interpreter in Danish and Norwegian at the court of Hamburg. On September 1, 1939, she was given the job of censoring Scandinavian mail. While working in this capacity, she began smuggling messages on scraps of paper, including toilet paper, from the Jews in the ghettos. She smuggled letters out of the censor's office and made sure they were sent to relatives in Scandinavia. When hundreds of prisoners from Norway were placed in Fuhlsbittel prison, officials gave her the job of censoring their mail and supervising their visits by the pastor of Hamburg's Norwegian Seaman's Mission. On her first visit, authorities brought in twenty starving prisoners wearing rags and wooden shoes. By the end of the war, Zassenhaus had contact with over 1,200 Scandinavian prisoners. She committed all the details of their families to memory, and despite orders to the contrary, she gave them news from home and passed them photographs and messages. She brought in bread, vitamins, medicine, pencils, paper, and chewing tobacco. The Gestapo interrogated her three times.

On July 24, 1943, Operation Gomorrah, an Allied air offensive from July 24 to August 3, 1943, designed to destroy the German port of Hamburg, began and Zassenhaus's workload increased dramatically as political prisoners poured into Germany. She fashioned a card index system to keep track of information on more than 1,000 prisoners. When prisoners were transferred to other prisons, she tracked them with her file. On August 22, 1944, her youngest brother, Wilfried, was killed in Russia and the Zassenhaus home was filled with strangers who had been bombed out of their homes. They illegally listened to the BBC from London with blankets over their heads to hide the sounds of the radio and baked bread with flour purchased on the black market with the family silver. As the war progressed, however, even these activities were curtailed, and Zassenhaus went to Dresden to try to find thirty of her original prisoners who were missing. She was there when the Allies bombed Dresden in February 1945. After a short stay in Berlin, she returned to Dresden to find that the Swedish Red Cross had negotiated with Heinrich Himmler to release the Danish and Norwegian prisoners. Her files became vital in tracking down the prisoners so that they could be released.

After the war Zassenhaus helped look for war orphans. She appealed to the former prisoners for help and they responded with food and clothing. In 1947 she was the first German after the war to be invited to Norway and Denmark, where she was regarded as a national heroine.

She studied medicine in Copenhagen, and in 1952, she and her mother emigrated to the United States where she practiced medicine. In 1979, producers invited her to return to Europe to relive her wartime experiences for British television.

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ZIMETBAUM, MALA

(1920 or 1922-1944)

Camp Prisoner, Auschwitz Escapee, Poland

Mala Zimetbaum, said to be the first woman to escape from Auschwitz, was born in Brzesko, Poland, in 1920 or 1922. Her family moved to Belgium in the 1930s and settled in Antwerp where Zimetbaum joined Hanoar Hatzioni, a Zionist youth group. When her father became blind, she was forced to leave school and go to work to help support the family. In September 1942, Zimetbaum was caught, arrested, and sent to Auschwitz.

Zimetbaum spoke several languages and so was given the prestigious job of interpreter in the camp. She was also used as a "runner," which enabled her to move from one part of the camp to another. She used her position to help families contact each other and carry messages and medicine. One of her jobs was to assign prisoners released from the hospital to work detail. She assigned the weak to light work and warned patients of coming gas-chamber selections, thus saving many lives. She also became part of the camp underground.

In 1944 Zimetbaum met a young Polish prisoner named Adek Galinski who, as a mechanic, was allowed into the women's section of the prison to fix machines. He was in contact with the underground, which was going to help him escape so he could warn the world of the atrocities at Auschwitz. He included Zimetbaum in his plans and the two managed to break out on June 24, 1944.

When guards counted the prisoners that evening and found prisoner no. 19880 missing, Zimetbaum became a camp heroine. It was believed that Galinski and Zimetbaum reached the Slovak border before being arrested and returned to Auschwitz two weeks later. The Nazis tortured